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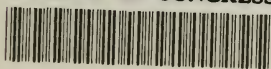
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How the Flag was Saved.

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How the Day was Saved:

A SKETCH

READ BY

GEN. A. B. NETTLETON,

BEFORE

The Dime Sociables of Cheltenham Hills,

THURSDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 17th 1874,

AND ORDERED TO BE PRINTED FOR THE USE OF THE MEMBERS.

"When the battle's lost and won—

That will be ere set of sun."

—Macbeth.

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How the Day was Saved.



WHEN the historian of the year A. D. 2000 shall come to record and analyze the military movements of our recent war of the Rebellion, he will probably dwell with especial enthusiasm on two campaigns as being at once the most dramatic and illustrious of the great conflict—I refer to Sherman's march to the sea, and Sheridan's campaign of the Shenandoah valley. Speaking of the latter, undoubtedly its central and crowning event was the battle of Cedar Creek, fought on the 19th of October, 1864. As an illustration of the wonderful influence of one man over many, and as an example of snatching victory from defeat, this action hardly has a parallel in history.

It will be remembered that in 1864, with Grant and Meade and Sheridan in the east, and Sherman and Thomas in the west, the Union army closed with the Confederate in a final struggle. In August, after Grant with all his available force had besieged Richmond and Petersburg, Lee, feeling secure behind his fortifications, detached an army of thirty thousand picked men, strong with cavalry, under General Early, to invade the North by way of the Shenandoah valley, threaten Washington from the rear, and if possible compel Grant to retreat from the James, as McClellan had been forced to do two years before.

To checkmate this bold and skilful movement, Grant sent Sheridan with two divisions of cavalry and the Sixth corps of infantry by transports to Washington, and thence by rapid marches to Harper's Ferry and Winchester. Then

followed that series of battles and Union victories, which, coupled with Sherman's successes in the west, lit up the whole horizon, and gave the nation the first real glimpse of its final triumph and the coming peace.

At the time of which I now speak (October 19) we of Sheridan's army regarded the fighting of the season as about ended. We had defeated Early in two pitched battles, had fought and routed his really effective cavalry in several engagements, had pursued his army south beyond Staunton, and supposed we had thoroughly broken its strength and spirit.

Falling back toward the Potomac, to a point twenty miles south of Winchester, where Cedar Creek and the North Fork of the Shenandoah form a partial line of defence nearly across the valley, Sheridan ordered his army into camp on the north side of the streams just named, and himself went to Washington for consultation with Stanton and Grant, leaving General Wright of the Sixth corps temporarily in command.

As our army was encamped, facing southward, it presented a front of nearly six miles—the infantry in the center, protecting its own front with a line of pickets on the river bank, Merritt's division of cavalry on the left, Custer's on the right, and a strong line of mounted pickets extending beyond each flank to the mountains which wall in the valley on either side. Directly in front of our center, and across the narrow river, rose the bold front of Massanutten mountain—the northern extremity of a subordinate range extending southward from this point, parallel to the Blue Ridge, and dividing the Shenandoah valley lengthwise.

Here we had rested in comparative quiet several days, having the usual day-break skirmish between our pickets and the enemy's scouting parties, the usual "grape-vine telegrams" announcing a wholesale surrender of the Con-

federate army to Grant, the usual wicked jokes about the "hundred-day" gentlemen, who were so eager to get to the front and "smell powder" before their term expired, the usual grumbling about rations and the usual alacrity in consuming them.

The 18th of October in the Shenandoah valley was such a day as few have seen who have not spent an Autumn in Virginia; crisp and bright and still in the morning, mellow and golden and still at noon, crimson and glorious and still at the sun-setting; just blue enough in the distance to soften without obscuring the outline of the mountains—just hazy enough to render the atmosphere visible without limiting the range of sight. As evening closed above the valley, the soft pleadings of some homesick soldier's flute floated out through the quiet camp, while around a blazing camp-fire an impromptu glee-club of Ohio boys lightened the hour and their own hearts by singing the songs of home.

An unusually large letter-mail arrived that evening, and was distributed to the men—which reminds me that the First Connecticut Cavalry, belonging to our division, had a unique and pleasant manner of announcing the arrival of a mail: the regimental trumpeters, constituting a sort of cornet band, would form in front of the colonel's tent and play "Home, Sweet Home," sometimes following that immediately with "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

The letters were all read and their contents discussed, the flute had ceased its complaining, the eight o'clock roll-call was over, taps had sounded, lights were out in the tents, the cook-fires flickered low, the mists of the autumn night gathered grey and chill, the sentinels paced back and forth in front of the various headquarters, the camp was still—that many-headed monster, a great army, was asleep.

Midnight came, and with it no sound but the tramp of the relief-guard as the sergeant replaced the tired sentinels;

one o'clock, and all was tranquil as a peace convention ; two, three o'clock, and yet the troops slept on.

At four, the silence was broken by sharp firing in the direction of our cavalry pickets, next the western side of the valley. The firing increased in volume, suggesting an attack in force by cavalry. General Custer (than whom, by the way, the wars of the century probably have not developed an abler leader of a cavalry division) quietly dispatched a regiment to support our outposts, and awaited developments, which speedily came. Fifteen minutes later heavy picket firing was heard in front of the infantry, two miles from where our cavalry division was encamped. The firing on our extreme right gradually died away and that in front of the infantry line rapidly increased, showing that the movement on our right had been a feint, while the real attack had now begun against the center.

"Boots and saddles" was blown from division, brigade and regimental headquarters. The darkness rang with the blare of bugles and the shouts of officers hurrying the troopers from their dreams to their horses.

The rattle of musketry in front of the infantry increased to heavy volleys, the volleys thickened into a continuous roar, and now, as day began to dawn, the deep bass of the artillery came in to complete the grand but terrible chorus of battle.

Our division was speedily mounted and in line by regiments, awaiting orders. Awaiting orders! That is the time that tries the courage of the bravest. Once in the heat, and hurry, and din of the battle, and the average soldier forgets fear in the excitement of the hour; but to stand at a safe distance, though within easy sight and hearing of the conflict, ready, expectant, every nerve strung, awaiting the word of command to march into the hailstorm of death—that is the crucial test. It is at such a time that all the mental struggle involved in a soldier's death is under-

gone, leaving nothing but the mere physical pang of sudden dying to complete the sacrifice. "Custer's division to the center!" was the laconic command from Gen. Wright; and as the sun was rising over four thousand troopers, with accompanying batteries, marched into the fight.

As we came into full view of the field, the whole terrible truth flashed upon us—the infantry had been surprised in their beds by Early's reinforced army; thousands of our men had been killed, wounded or captured, Sheridan's victorious and invincible army was routed and in disorderly retreat before a confident, yelling and pursuing enemy. The roads were crowded with wagons and ambulances hurrying to the rear, while the fields were alive with wounded, stragglers, camp-followers, and disorganized troops, without officers, without arms, and without courage—all bent on being the first to carry the news of disaster back to Winchester.

A brave nucleus of the army, which had not shared in the surprise and the consequent demoralization, was fighting with determined pluck to prevent disaster from becoming disgrace. The timely arrival and the spirited onset of the cavalry soon checked the pursuit by the Confederates, and gave time for our infantry to begin reforming their lines—but the battle and the retreat continued. The enemy already occupied the camps where the Sixth corps had slept the night before; by nine o'clock our battle line was three miles back of our former position, we had lost twenty-two pieces of artillery and two thousand prisoners. Our antagonists were pressing their advantage vigorously, and the best we hoped for was that our strong cavalry force could so protect the retreat to Winchester as to prevent the annihilation of the army and the exposure of Washington.

The universal thought, and, in varying phrase, the spontaneous utterance, was "Oh, for one hour of Sheridan!"

The unvarying success that had attended our leader in all his campaigns; the instinctive promptness with which he seemed to seize the key of every situation however difficult; the amazing quickness and precision with which he formed new plans on the field, and his thunderbolt method of executing each design; his success in imparting to his infantry much of the mobility and dash of cavalry, and to his cavalry much of the coherency and steadiness of infantry—all these had combined to give his army unbounded faith in his leadership, and enthusiasm for the man. But Sheridan was twenty miles away, at Winchester, where he had arrived the night before from Washington.

Meantime the battle roared with unabating fury. The sulphurous cloud that overhung the field, and the dense volumes of dust that rose behind the wheeling batteries and the charging troopers, contrasted grimly with the sweet light of that perfect October day as it could be seen beyond the limits of the battle-field.

At this juncture, those of us who were stationed near the Winchester pike heard, far to the rear of us, a faint cheer go up, as a hurrying horseman passed a group of wounded soldiers, and dashed at full speed down that historic road toward our line of battle. As he drew nearer we could see that the coal-black horse was flecked with foam, both horse and rider grimed with dust, and the dilated nostrils and laboring breath of the former told of a race both long and swift. A moment more and a deafening cheer, like a shout of victory, broke from the troops in that part of the field, as they recognized in the coming horseman their longed-for Sheridan. Above the roar of musketry and artillery that shout was heard from end to end of both lines of battle. The news flashed from brigade to brigade along our front with telegraphic speed, and then, as Sheridan, cap in hand, dashed along the rear of the struggling line,

thus confirming to all eyes the fact of his arrival, a continuous cheer burst from the whole army. Hope took the place of fear, courage the place of despondency, cheerfulness the place of gloom. The entire aspect of things seemed changed in a moment; the retreat instantly stopped; brigades falling back to take a new position faced about and resumed their place in line; stragglers picked up the first guns they came to and voluntarily rejoined their regiments; order seemed to have come spontaneously out of chaos—an army out of a rabble.

The enemy, believing the continued cheers announced the arrival of Federal reinforcements, became more cautious, and even threw up temporary breastworks. By one o'clock our lines were entirely reformed, and everything indicated that we should be able to hold our position without further retreat. At two the Confederates, who had ascertained that we had received no reinforcements, made a deadly, skilful and persistent attack along the whole front, hoping to close the day with a final and complete rout of our entire army. The attack was repulsed at every point.

Then Sheridan ordered the cavalry to the right and left flanks, and sent the command along the line to prepare for a general advance, to close with a grand charge which should regain all we had lost. Everything was soon ready; two hundred bugles sounded the advance; all our artillery opened on the enemy with shot and shell, and the long line of cavalry and infantry moved steadily forward across the open plain toward the rebel position—with the coolness of a holiday parade. To one who had seen the rout and panic and loss of the morning, it seemed impossible that this was the same army.

The enemy was evidently astonished at our taking the offensive, but met our attack with confident coolness, and then with determined fury.

As soon as the Confederate infantry was fully engaged with ours in the centre, the order was given for the cavalry divisions to charge both flanks of the enemy's line. The bugles sounded, the horses caught the spirit of the hour and pressed forward with steady but resistless speed ; six thousand troopers with drawn sabres sent up a battle yell wild enough to wake the slain over whom we galloped, and—we were in the midst of that grandest of martial movements, a genuine cavalry charge.

The effect was magical. The enemy's cavalry first made a stout resistance then scattered like sheep to the hills ; and his infantry line, having both flanks turned back upon itself by our cavalry, and its center crushed by a final magnificent charge of our infantry, broke in confusion and started southward in confused retreat. Panic seized every part of the rebel force ; infantry vied with artillery, and both with the wagon trains, in a pell-mell race for the river ford, and as the sun went down the army which at day-break had gained one of the most dramatic and decisive victories of the war, was a frantic mob decimated in numbers and flying before the same army it had so completely surprised and defeated.

Our cavalry pressed the pursuit, making constant captures, until the dense darkness prevented, and then our troops slept in the camps of the night before, having about them, as trophies of the day's work, fifty-two pieces of captured artillery, three hundred wagons and three thousand prisoners of war.

This ended the career of Early's army. As an army it never fought another battle—its commander never again attempted to redeem the Shenandoah valley or to invade the North.

And this is the end of the story of, How the Day was Saved !

Sheridan's Ride.

Up from the South at break of day,
Bringing to Winchester fresh dismay,
The affrighted air with a shudder bore,
Like a herald in haste, to the chieftain's door,
The terrible grumble and rumble and roar,
Telling the battle was on once more,
And Sheridan twenty miles away.

And wider still those billows of war
Thundered along the horizon's bar,
And louder yet into Winchester rolled
The roar of that red sea uncontrolled,
Making the blood of the listener cold
As he thought of the stake in that fiery fray,
With Sheridan twenty miles away.

But there is a road from Winchester town,
A good, broad highway leading down;
And there through the flash of the morning light,
A steed as black as the steeds of night,
Was seen to pass as with eagle flight.
As if he knew the terrible need,
He stretched away with the utmost speed;
Hills rose and fell,—but his heart was gay,
With Sheridan fifteen miles away.

* * * * *

Under his spurning feet the road
Like an arrowy Alpine river flowed,
And the landscape sped away behind
Like an ocean flying before the wind;

And the steed, like a bark fed with furnace ire,
Swept on with his wild eyes full of fire ;
But, lo ! he is nearing his heart's desire,
He is snuffing the smoke of the roaring fray,
With Sheridan only five miles away.

The first that the General saw were the groups
Of stragglers, and then the retreating troops ;
What was done,—what to do,—a glance told him both,
And, striking his spurs with a terrible oath,
He dashed down the line mid a storm of huzzas,
And the wave of retreat checked its course there because
The sight of the master compelled it to pause.
With foam and with dust the black charger was gray,
By the flash of his eye, and his nostril's play
He seemed to the whole great army to say,
“ I have brought you Sheridan all the way
From Winchester, down to save the day ! ”

Hurrah, hurrah for Sheridan !
Hurrah, hurrah for horse and man !
And when their statues are placed on high,
Under the dome of the Union sky,—
The American soldier's Temple of Fame,—
There with the glorious General's name
Be it said in letters both bold and bright :
“ Here is the steed that saved the day
By carrying Sheridan into the fight,
From Winchester,—twenty miles away.”

THOMAS BUCHANAN READ.





